Guy de Maupassant

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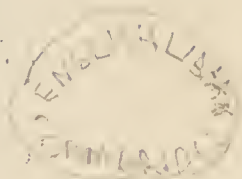

GUY DE MAUPASSANT.

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BY

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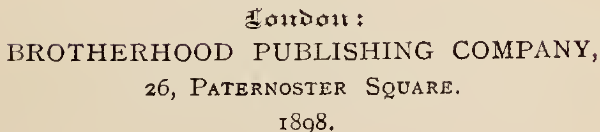
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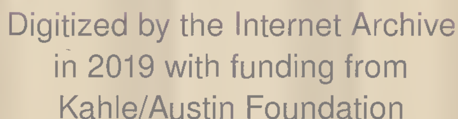
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GUY DE MAUPASSANT.

It was, I think, in 1881, that Tourgenief, while visiting me, got a French book, entitled "Maison Tellier," out of his portmanteau and gave it to me.

"Read it some day," said he, as if carelessly; just in the same way as, a year before, he had given me a number of "The Russian Wealth," containing a story by Garshine, then only beginning to write. He was evidently, as in Garshine's case, so now, afraid of influencing me one way or the other, and wished to have my altogether unbiassed opinion.

"It is by a young French writer," he said. "Look it over: it is not bad. He knows you, and greatly appreciates you," he added, as if wishing to propitiate me. "As a type, he reminds me of Drouginine; he is, like Drouginine, an excellent son, a good friend, *un*

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homme d'un commerce sur,* and, besides this, he associates with the working people, guides them, helps them. Even in his relations with women he reminds me of Drouginine." And Tourgenief told me something astonishing, incredible, as to Maupassant's conduct in this respect.

That particular period, the year 1881, was for me the fiercest time of the inner reconstruction of my whole understanding of life, and in this reconstruction those employments called the fine arts, to which I had formerly given all my powers, had not only lost all their former importance in my eyes, but had become altogether obnoxious to me owing to the unnatural position they had hitherto occupied in my life, and which they generally occupy in the estimation of people of the rich classes.

Accordingly, I was not at all interested then in such works as the one recommended to me by Tourgenief. But, in order to please him, I read the book.

Whilst reading the first story, "Maison Tellier," notwithstanding its improper and trifling subject, I could not but recognise in its author what is termed genius.

He possessed that special gift, called genius, which consists in the faculty of intense, strenuous attention, applied, according to the author's tastes, to this or that subject; and by means of which the possessor of this capacity sees the things to which he applies his attention in some new aspect overlooked by others. This gift

* A man to be relied on.

of seeing what others do not see was evidently possessed by Maupassant. But, to judge by the little volume I read, he was unfortunately destitute of the chief of the three qualifications which, in addition to genius, are indispensable to a true work of art. These are: (1) A correct, that is, a moral, relation of the author to his subject; (2) perspicuity or beauty of expression (the two are identical); and (3) sincerity, *i.e.*, an unfeigned feeling of love or hatred to the subject depicted. Of these three Maupassant possessed only the last two, and was utterly without the first. He had not a correct, that is, a moral, relation to the subjects he described.

Judging by what I read, I came to the conclusion that Maupassant possessed genius, that gift of attention revealing in the objects and facts of life properties not perceived by others; that he possessed a beautiful form of expression, uttering clearly, simply, and with charm what he wished to say; and that he possessed also the merit of sincerity, without which a work of art produces no effect, that is, he did not merely pretend to love or hate, but did indeed love or hate what he described. But, unhappily, being destitute of the first and perhaps most important qualification for a work of art, of a correct, moral relation to what he described—that is, lacking a knowledge of the difference between good and evil—he loved and described that which he should not have loved and described, and did not love that which he should have loved and described. Thus, in this little volume, the author described with great minuteness and fondness how

women seduce men, and men women; he even, as in "La Femme de Paul," referred to certain obscenities difficult to understand. And not only with indifference, but even with contempt, he described the country labouring people as he would animals.

This ignorance of the distinction between good and evil is especially striking in the story, "Une Partie de Campagne." In this, as a most charming and amusing joke, is related a minute account of how two gentlemen, rowing with bare arms in a boat, seduced at the same time, one of them an elderly mother, the other a young girl, her daughter.

The sympathy of the author is evidently all the time so much on the side of these two villains, that he, I will not say ignores, but simply does not see what must have been experienced by the seduced mother and maiden daughter, by the father, and by the young man evidently engaged to the daughter. And, therefore, we not only have the revolting description of a disgusting crime represented as an amusing joke, but, moreover, the event itself is described falsely, in that only one side of the subject is presented, and that the most insignificant one, namely, the pleasure taken by the scoundrels.

In this same little volume there is a story, "Histoire d'une Fille de Ferme," which was specially recommended to me by Tourgenief, and which specially displeased me by again this incorrect relation of the author to his subject. He evidently sees in all the working folk whom he describes, only animals rising no

higher than sexual and maternal love, and therefore his descriptions produce an impression of incompleteness and artificiality.

Lack of understanding of the life and interests of the working people, and the representation of them as semi-brutes moved only by sensuality, spite, and greed, constitute two of the greatest and most serious deficiencies of most of the latest French authors, and, in their number, of Maupassant, who, not only in this story, but in all those others in which he treats of the people, always describes them as coarse, dull animals at whom one can only laugh. Certainly, French writers ought to know the nature of their own people better than I. But, notwithstanding that I am a Russian and have not lived with French peasants, I still assert that in so representing their own people French authors are wrong, and that the French labouring men cannot be such as they represent. If France—the France we know—with her truly great men, and the valuable contributions with which these great men have enriched science, art, and social life, and have assisted the moral development of humanity; if *this* France exists, then, also, that labouring class on whose shoulders has been, and is, supported this France of great men, must consist, not of brutes, but of men of great mental capacity. Therefore, I do not believe what is written in novels like "La Terre"* and in Maupassant's stories: just as I should not believe what I might be told concerning the existence of a

* By Zola.

beautiful house standing without foundations. It may well be that the virtues of the people are not so lofty as described to me in "La Petite Fadette" and "La Mare aux Diables."* Yet they exist—of that I am firmly persuaded. And a writer who portrays the people only as Maupassant does, describing with relish only the *haunches* and *gorges*† of Breton servant girls, and alluding to the life of labouring men with abhorrence and scoffing, commits a great mistake from the artistic point of view, because he describes his subject only from one, and that the most uninteresting, physical side, utterly leaving out of sight the other and more important spiritual side where lies the essence of the matter.

On the whole, the reading of the little book given me by Tourgenief left me altogether indifferent to the young writer.

So repugnant to me were the stories, "Une Partie de Campagne," "La Femme de Paul," and "L'histoire d'une Fille de Ferme," that I did not then remark the pretty story, "Le Papa de Simon," and the story, excellent in its description of the night, "Sur l'eau."

"Have we not," I thought, "in our time, when there are so many amateurs of book-writing, a sufficiency of men of genius, who either do not know how to apply their gift, or else boldly apply it to what it is utterly wrong and unnecessary to describe?" And so I said to Tourgenief. After which, I forgot all about Maupassant.

* Stories by George Sand. † Hips and throats.

The first work of his I saw after that was "Une Vie," which someone advised me to read. This book immediately made me change my opinion of Maupassant, and from that time forward I read with interest everything signed by his name. "Une Vie" is an excellent novel; not only incomparably the best novel by Maupassant, but perhaps the best French novel, after Hugo's "Les Miserables." Besides a remarkable power of genius, of that peculiar strenuous attention applied to the subject, by which the author perceives quite new features in the life he describes; in this novel are united, almost in equal degree, all the three qualifications for a true work of art: namely, a correct, that is, a moral, relation of the author to his subject; a beautiful form of expression; and sincerity, that is, love towards that which the author describes. Here the purport of life no longer appears to the author as consisting in the adventures of various male and female libertines; here the subject represents, as the title indicates, life; the life of a ruined, innocent, amiable-woman, disposed to all that is good, and ruined precisely by the same coarse, animal sensuality, which, in his former stories, stood to the author as the central and dominant feature of life. Here all the sympathies of the author are on the side of good.

The form, beautiful in the first stories, is here brought to so high a pitch of perfection, as, in my opinion, has been attained by no other French prose writer. And above all, the author does indeed love, and deeply love, that good family which he describes; and he does indeed

hate the coarse debauché who destroys the happiness and peace of this lovable family, and, especially, ruins the life of the heroine.

And this is why all the events and actors in this tale are so life-like and memorable. The weak, good-natured, debilitated mother; the upright, weak, attractive father; the still more attractive daughter in her simplicity, naturalness and sympathy with all that is good; their mutual relations, their first journey, their servants and neighbours; the sly, coarsely sensual, avaricious, fastidious, insolent suitor, who, as usual, deceives the innocent girl by the customary sham idealisation of the coarsest instinct; the marriage, Corsica, the beautiful descriptions of nature; the husband's coarse falseness, his seizure of power over the property, his quarrel with his father-in-law, the yielding of the good people, and the victory of insolence; the relations with the neighbours—all this is life itself in all its complexity and diversity. But not only is all this vividly and finely described; every part is, moreover, penetrated by a kind, pathetic tone which involuntarily infects the reader. One feels that the author loves this woman, loves her, not for her external form, but for her soul, for that which is good in her, that he commiserates with her, suffers with her: all of which is involuntarily transmitted to the reader. And the questions, "Why, for what end, is this fine being ruined?" "Ought it indeed to be so?" arise of themselves in the soul of the reader and compel him to examine into the meaning of human life.

Notwithstanding the false notes which here and there appear in the novel, such as, for example, the minute description of the skin of the young girl, or the impossible and unnecessary details as to how, through the Abbott's advice, the forsaken wife again becomes a mother (details which destroy all the charm of the heroine's purity), or the melodramatic and unnatural account of the injured husband's vengeance; notwithstanding these blemishes, not only did the novel appear to me to be excellent, but I saw behind it, no longer a talented chatterer and joker, not knowing and not wishing to know right from wrong (such as Maupassant had appeared to me to be from the first book), but a serious man, examining deeply into life, and already beginning to see his way in it.

The next novel by Maupassant which I read was "Bel Ami."

"Bel Ami" is a very unclean book. The author here evidently gives himself full licence in describing what attracts him, and at times seems to lose his dominant negative attitude towards his hero, and to pass over on to his side. But on the whole, "Bel Ami," like "Une Vie," has for basis a serious idea and sentiment. In "Une Vie" the fundamental idea is perplexity in the face of the cruel, meaningless, suffering life of an excellent woman ruined by a man's coarse sensuality; whereas here there is not only perplexity, but indignation at the prosperity and success of a coarse, sensual brute, who, by means of this same sensuality, shapes his career and attains a high position in society;

indignation also at the depravity of the whole circle of society in which the hero attains success. In the former novel the author seems to ask: "Why, for what end, has this fine being been ruined? What was the cause?" Here, in this latter novel, he seems to answer: "All that is pure and good has perished and is perishing in our society, because this society is depraved, insane, horrible."

The last scene in the novel—the marriage, in a fashionable church of the triumphant scoundrel, decorated with the order of the Legion of Honour to a pure girl, daughter of an elderly and previously irreproachable mother, who has been seduced by him; a marriage blessed by a bishop, and regarded as something good and right by all present—expresses this idea with extraordinary force. Notwithstanding its encumbrance with unclean details (in which, it is to be deplored, the author seems to find pleasure) in this novel, is seen the same serious demands from life.

Read the conversation of the old poet with Duroy after dinner (when leaving the Walters, if I remember rightly). The old poet bares life before his young friend, and exhibits it as it is, with its eternal and inevitable companion, death.

"It has already got hold of me, *la gueuse*,"* says he, alluding to death. "It has already shaken out my teeth, snatched away my hair, crippled my limbs, and is just ready to swallow me up. I am already in its

* The old hag.

power; it is only playing with me, like a cat with a mouse, knowing that I cannot escape. Fame? riches?—what good are they, since with these one cannot buy a woman's love. For it is only a woman's love that is worth living for. And death takes that away. Takes away that; then health, strength, and life itself. It is the lot of every one. And there is nothing more."

Such is the meaning of the words of the aged poet. But Duroy, the successful lover of all the women who please him, is so full of sensual energy and strength that he both hears and does not hear, understands and does not understand, what has been said. He hears and understands, but the source of sensual life in him gushes out from him with such power that this unquestionable truth, while predicting the same end for him, does not disturb him.

It is the presentation of this inner contradiction in life, which, in addition to the satirical value of the novel, constitutes its chief significance. This same idea gleams in the fine scene of the death of the consumptive journalist. The author puts to himself the question: "What is this life? How settle this contradiction between the love of life and the knowledge of inevitable death?" And he does not answer. He seems to seek, to pause, and does not decide either one way or the other. And therefore, in novel also, the author's moral relation to life continues to be correct.

But in the succeeding novels this moral relation to life begins to be confused. The appreciation of the

phenomena of life begins to waver, to grow obscure, and in the last novels it is completely perverted.

In "Mont-Oriol," Maupassant seems to unite the subjects of the two preceding novels and to repeat himself. Notwithstanding the fine descriptions, full of subtle humour, of a fashionable watering-place and the activity of the doctors in it, we have here the same debauché, Paul, as trivial and merciless as the husband in "Une Vie"; and the same deceived, ruined, meek, feeble, lonely — always lonely — sympathetic woman, and the same impassive triumph of pettiness and triviality as "Bel Ami.'

The idea is the same, but the moral attitude of the author towards what he describes is already much lower, lower than in "Une Vie" especially. The author's inner appreciation of right and wrong begins to get confused. Notwithstanding his abstract wish to be impartially objective, the scoundrel Paul evidently has all his sympathy. Accordingly, the love story of this Paul, and his attempts at and success in seduction, produce a discordant impression. The reader does not know what the author intends; whether he wishes to show all the emptiness and vileness of Paul (who in one scene unconcernedly turns away from and insults a woman merely because her waist is spoiled by her pregnancy with his child); or, on the contrary, to show how pleasant and easy it is to live as did this Paul.

In the succeeding novels: "Pierre et Jean," "Fort comme la Mort," and "Notre Cœur," the moral attitude of the author towards the personages of his stories

becomes yet more confused, and in the last-named disappears altogether. All these novels bear the seal of indifference, haste, artificiality, and, above all, again that same absence of a correct moral relation to life which was evident in the author's first writings. This begins precisely with the time when Maupassant's reputation as a fashionable author had become established, and he became liable to that temptation, so dreadful in our time, to which every celebrated writer is subjected and especially one so attractive as Maupassant. On the one hand is the success of his first novels, the praise of the press and the flattery of society, especially of women; on the other, the continually increasing amount of remuneration (never, however, keeping up with the continually augmenting expenses); and yet further the insistent demands of the editors, who, outbidding each other, beseechingly flatter the author, and, no longer considering the merits of the works offered, accept enthusiastically everything signed by a name now established with the public. All these temptations are so great that they evidently turn his head, and he succumbs to them. He continues to elaborate the form of his novels as well as before, sometimes even better. He even loves and hates what he describes, but no longer loves it because it is good and moral, *i.e.*, loved by all; nor hates it because it is evil and hated by all, but only because this or that accidentally pleases or displeases him.

From the time of "Bel Ami" this stamp of hurriedness, and, still more, of artifice, is upon all Maupassant's

novels. Henceforth he forsakes the method of his first two novels; he no longer takes as the basis of them certain demands, and on that ground describes the conduct of his character, but writes his novels as do all the common hack novelists, that is, he invents the most interesting and pathetic, or the most contemporary persons and situations, and of them composes his novel, adorning it with all those observations which he has had the opportunity of making, and which fit into the framework of the story, and does not in the least trouble himself as to how the events described relate to the demands of morality. Such are "Pierre et Jean," "Fort comme la Mort," and "Notre Cœur."

However much, in French novels, we may have become accustomed to read about "the married life of three," about the ever-present lover whose existence is known to everyone except the husband, it still remains altogether incomprehensible to us how it should happen that all husbands are always fools, cheated and ridiculous, whereas all lovers, who in the end themselves marry and become husbands, not only are neither ridiculous nor deceived, but are heroic. And it is even less comprehensible how all women are depraved, and yet all mothers saintly.

Yet it is upon these most unnatural and unlikely, and above all, deeply immoral ideas, that "Pierre et Jean," and "Fort comme la Mort," are founded. Therefore, the sufferings of the characters in these novels affect us but little. The mother of Pierre and Jean, who was able throughout her life to deceive her husband, calls

forth little sympathy when she is obliged to confess her sin to her son ; and still less, when she justifies herself by saying that she could not but make use of the opportunity of happiness which presented itself. Yet less can we sympathise with the man in " Fort comme la Mort," when, after all his life deceiving his friend and depraving his friend's wife, he is distressed by not being able to deprave his mistress' daughter also, in consequence of his old age. The last novel, " Notre Cœur," has no inner purpose but the description of various kinds of sexual love. We find described a satiated, idle libertine, who knows not what he wants, and who at one time lives with a woman as depraved as, and even more depraved than himself (she not even having the excuse of sensuality, being a mentally depraved woman); and at another time forsakes her and lives with a servant; and then returns to the former, and, as it appears, lives with both. In " Pierre et Jean," and " Fort comme la Mort," there are still some touching scenes; but this last novel, " Notre Cœur " excites only disgust.

The problem in Maupassant's first novel, " Une Vie," stands thus. " Here is a human being, good, intelligent, lovable, inclined towards all that is good ; and this being, for some reason or other, is sacrificed, first, to a coarse, fastidious, stupid, bestial husband, and, after that, to a similar son. And she perishes aimlessly, having given nothing to the world. Why is this? " The author thus puts the question, and, as it were, gives no answer. But the whole of his novel, all his feeling of sympathy with his heroine and condemnation of that which

caused her ruin, is a sufficient answer to his question. If there be one man who has understood her suffering and expressed it, then it is already redeemed; as Job put it to his friends, when they complain that no one will know of his sufferings. If the suffering is discovered, understood, then it is redeemed. So here, the author has discovered, understood, and revealed to men this suffering, And the suffering is redeemed, for once understood by men, it will sooner or later be put an end to.

In the next novel, "Bel Ami," the question stands, not, "Why do the righteous suffer?" but, "Why do the unrighteous get wealth and fame?" and, "What are wealth and fame, and how are they obtained?" As before, the problem carries with it its own answer; that answer being the denunciation of all that is so highly prized by the crowd of men. The subject of the second novel is still serious, but the moral relation of the author to the subject he describes already weakens considerably, and whereas in the first novel, spots of sensuality which spoil it appear only hear and there, in "Bel Ami," these spots multiply, and many chapters are filled with dirt alone, which seems to please the author.

In the next, "Mont-Oriol," the question: "Why, wherefore, the suffering of a worthy woman, and the success and happiness of a wild debauché?" is no longer put; and it seems tacitly assumed that so it should be. And no moral demands are any more perceptible; but, without the least necessity, and uncalled for by any artistic consideration, there appear dirty

sensual descriptions. As an example of this violation of artistic taste springing from the incorrect relation of the author to his subject, the minute description in this novel of the heroine in her bath is specially striking. This description has no object whatever, it is connected with neither the external nor inner purpose of the novel.

"Bubbles appear on the pink flesh."

"Well, what of that?" asks the reader.

"Nothing," answers the author. "I describe it because I like such descriptions."

In the next two novels, "Pierre et Jean" and "Fort comme la Mort," no moral attitude at all is perceptible. Both novels are constructed upon vice, deceit, and falsehood, which bring the actors into tragical situations.

In the last novel, "Notre Cœur," the position of the actors is most monstrous, wild, and immoral; and they no longer struggle with anything, but only seek enjoyments, vain, sensual, and sexual: and the author appears to sympathise with their inclinations. The only deduction that can possibly be drawn from this last novel is, that the greatest happiness in life is sexual intercourse, and that, therefore, one must secure this happiness in the pleasantest possible way.

The immoral relation to life is yet more striking in the half-novel, "Yvette." The subject of this work, awful in its immorality, is as follows:—A beautiful girl, innocent in soul, but depraved in the manners she has learnt in the dissolute circle of her mother, leads a libertine into error. He falls in love with her, but, imagining that the girl knowingly chatters the obscene

nonsense she has learnt in the society of her mother, and which she merely repeats, parrot-like, without understanding it; imagining that the girl is already depraved, he coarsely proposes to her an immoral union. This proposal terrifies, insults her (for she loves him); it opens her eyes to her own position and that of her mother, and she suffers deeply. This profoundly touching scene is beautifully described: the collision between a beautiful, innocent soul and the depravity of the world. And here one might have stopped, but the author, without any external or inner necessity, continues his story, making this man penetrate to the girl at night and deprave her. It is evident that the author, in the early part of the novel, was on the side of the girl, but in the later part he suddenly goes over to the side of the libertine. One impression destroys the other. And the whole novel falls to pieces; crumbles down like bread which has not been kneaded.

In all his novels after "Bel Ami" (I am not now alluding to his short stories, which are his chief merit and glory; of them, later), Maupassant has evidently submitted to the theories now reigning, not only in his Parisian circle, but everywhere among artists; theories that for a work of art, it is not only unnecessary to have any clear conception of what is right and what is wrong; but that, on the contrary, the artist must totally ignore all moral questions, there even being a certain artistic merit in his so doing. According to this theory, the artist may, or should, represent that which is true to life, that which really is; that which is fine, and therefore

pleases him; and even that which may be useful as material for "science"; but that to take into consideration questions as to what is moral or immoral, right or wrong, is not the artist's business.

I remember a celebrated painter showing me a picture of his representing a religious procession. It was beautifully painted, but no relation of the artist to his work was perceptible.

"Well then, do you regard these ceremonies as good, and necessary to be carried out, or not?" I asked him.

With some condescension to my simplicity, he told me he did not know about that, and did not think it necessary to know; his business was to represent *life*.

"But at least you sympathise with this?"

"I cannot say I do."

"Well, do you then dislike these ceremonies?"

"Neither the one nor the other," answered with a smile of compassion at my silliness this modern profoundly cultured artist, who represented life without understanding its purpose, neither loving nor hating its phenomena. And so, it is to be regretted, thought Maupassant.

In his preface to "Pierre et Jean," he says that the writer is usually bidden to "Console me, amuse me, sadden me, touch my heart, make me muse, make me laugh, make me tremble, make me weep, make me think. Only some chosen minds bid the artist compose

something beautiful (*quelque chose de beau*)* in the form which will most agree with your temperament."

It was to gratify this demand of "chosen minds" that Maupassant wrote his novels, naively imagining that what is regarded as fine in his circle is indeed that beauty which art must serve.

And in the circle in which Maupassant moved, that beauty which has been, and is, regarded as necessarily to be served by art, is principally woman, and sexual intercourse with her: woman young and pretty, woman for the most part stripped bare. It was so held, not only by all Maupassant's comrades in "art"—painters and sculptors, novelists and poets—but also by philosophers, teachers of the rising generation. Thus the celebrated Renan, in his work, "Marcus Aurelius," condemning Christianity for not understanding feminine beauty, speaks plainly as follows:—"The fault of Christianity is well disclosed; it is too exclusively moral, it has altogether sacrificed beauty. Whereas, in the eyes of a complete philosophy, beauty, far from being a mere superficial advantage, a danger, an inconvenience, is a gift of God, like virtue. It is as worthy as virtue. A beautiful woman expresses one aspect of the divine purpose, one of God's aims, as effectively as a man of genius, or a virtuous woman. She knows this, and hence her pride. She instinctively feels the infinite treasure which she carries in her body; she well knows that, without cleverness, without talent, without any

* Something that is beautiful.

particular virtue, she counts amongst the highest of God's manifestations. And why prohibit her from advantageously exhibiting the gift which has been awarded her, prohibit her from mounting the diamond which she has received?

"Woman, in embellishing herself, accomplishes a duty; she practises an art, an exquisite art, in a sense the most fascinating of arts. Do not let us be led astray by the smile which certain words provoke in the frivolous. (!) Mankind awards the palm of genius to the artistic Greek, who knew how to solve that most delicate of problems, the adornment of the human body, which is to adorn perfection itself; and yet some people wish to see only an affair of rags in the attempt to further God's finest work, woman's beauty. Woman's toilette, with all its delicacies, is, in its way, high art.

"Epochs and nations which know how to succeed in this, are the great epochs and the great nations. The history of Christianity shows that by excluding this species of art it postponed the full development of the social ideal which it conceived to a much later period, when the revolt of men of the world had broken the narrow yoke primitively imposed upon the sect by an exalted fanaticism."*

So that, in the opinion of this leader of the young generation, it is only now that the French milliners and hairdressers have corrected the fault committed by Christianity, and have re-established beauty in its true and elevated position.

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* "Marc Aurèle" p. 555.

In order that there should be no doubt as to what we should understand him to mean by beauty, the same celebrated writer, historian, and man of science, wrote the drama, "L'Abesse de Jouarre," in which he showed that sexual intercourse with woman constitutes an elevated and fine way of serving this beauty. In this drama, which strikes one by its absence of talent, and especially by the coarseness of the conversations between D'Arcy and the Abesse, where in the first words it becomes evident what kind of love this gentleman discusses with the supposedly innocent and highly moral maiden, who is not in the least shocked—in this drama it is shown that the most highly moral people, in full view of the death to which they are condemned, cannot, a few hours before death, find anything better to do than to addict themselves to their animal passion.

So that, in the society in which Maupassant grew up and was educated, the representation of feminine beauty and of sex-love, quite seriously, as a thing long ago admitted and decided by the cleverest and most learned men, was, and is, regarded as the true object of the highest art, of "*le grand art*."

It is to this very theory, dreadful in its absurdity, that Maupassant subjected himself when he became a fashionable writer. And, as was to be expected, this false ideal led him, in his novels, into a series of mistakes, and into work weaker and more weak.

In this appears the essential difference between the demands of the novel and of the short story. The novel's object, even its surface object, is the description

of one full human life, or of many; and therefore the novel writer must have a clear and firm idea of what is right and what is wrong in life.

This Maupassant had not; on the contrary, according to the theory he held, such was regarded undesirable. Had he been a novelist like some talentless writers of sensual novels, he would, being without genius, quietly have described what was wrong as being right, and his novels would have been full and interesting for people of the same views as himself. But Maupassant had genius, *i.e.*, he saw things in their essentials, and therefore involuntarily discovered truth—he involuntarily saw the evil in that which he wished to consider good. This is why, in all his novels except the first, his sympathies continually waver. At one moment he represents wrong as being right; at another, he admits that wrong is wrong, and right is right; at another, again, he keeps shifting from the one standpoint to the other. And this destroys the very essence of every artistic impression, the framework on which it is built. People little sensitive to art often think that a work of art possesses unity when the same personages act in it from beginning to end, when all is built on one and the same fundamental plan of incidents, or when the life of one and the same man is described. This is a mistake; and the unity appears true only to the superficial observer. The cement which binds together every work of art into a whole and thereby produces the effect of life-like illusion, is not the unity of persons and places, but that of the author's independent moral

relation to the subject. In reality, when we read or examine the art-work of a new author, the fundamental questions which arise in our mind are always of this kind: "Well, what sort of a man are you? What distinguishes you from all the people I know, and what information can you give me, as to how we must look upon our life." Whatever the artist depicts, whether it be saints or robbers, kings or lackeys, we seek and see only the soul of the artist himself. And if he be an established writer, with whom we are already acquainted, the question is no longer: "Who are you?" but "Well, what more can you tell me that is new? From what standpoint will you now illuminate life for me?" Therefore, a writer who has not a clear, definite and fresh view of the universe, and especially a writer who does not even consider this necessary, cannot produce a work of art. He may write much and beautifully, but a work of art will not result. So it was with Maupassant in his novels.

If, in his first two novels, and especially in the first, he had an evident and firm sympathy for what is good and dislike for what is evil, it was for two reasons. Firstly, because he evidently heartily loved and respected that person who had served as the prototype of his heroine in "Une Vie," and heartily hated that living or collective personage which served as a model for Duroy (in which he was himself partly personified). Secondly, because in his first novel he had not yet become a fashionable writer, had not succumbed to all the snares of this position, and there-

fore did not as yet hold the theory, dominant in his circle, that the object of art consists only in making "*quelque chose de beau.*" But when he did begin to write his novels according to this theory, then involuntarily took place what occurred in "Yvette" and in "Notre Coeur," namely a contradictory estimation of the conduct of his personages. The author does not know whom he should love, and whom hate; therefore neither does the reader. And, not knowing this, the reader takes no interest in the events described. And therefore with the exception of the first two (strictly speaking, excepting only the first one), all the novels of Maupassant, as novels, are weak; and had Maupassant left us only these, he would have been merely a remarkable illustration of how a brilliant genius may perish on account of the abnormal society in which it is developed and those false theories about art which are invented by people who do not love art and therefore do not understand it. But, fortunately, Maupassant wrote short stories in which he did not subject himself to the false theory he had accepted; writing, not "*quelque chose de beau,*" but what touched or revolted his moral feeling. And in these stories (not in all, but in the best of them), it is observable how this moral feeling grew in the author, and how by degrees, and unconsciously, that which formerly constituted the chief meaning and happiness of his life was for him dethroned and assessed at its true value.

And the astonishing capacity of every man of real genius, if only he does not do violence to himself under

the influence of false theory, lies precisely in this: that genius teaches its possessor, leads him forward on the road of moral development, and makes him love that which deserves love, and hate that which deserves hatred. An artist is only an artist because he sees things, not as he wishes to see them, but as they are. The possessor of genius, the man, may fall into error; but genius, if only free rein be given it as Maupassant has given it rein in his stories, will disclose, undrape the object to him; will make him love it if it deserve love, and hate it if it deserve hatred. With every true artist, when, under the influence of his circle, he begins to represent that which he ought not to represent, there happens what happened to Balaam, who, wishing to bless, cursed what should be cursed, and, wishing to curse, blessed what should be blessed; he will involuntarily do, not what he wishes, but what he should do. And this happened with Maupassant.

There has hardly been another writer who so sincerely thought that all the welfare, all the meaning of life, is in women, in love, and who with such a power of passion described from all sides, woman and her love; and there was hardly ever a writer who with such clearness and precision has shown all the awful phases of that same thing which seemed to be highest and to afford the greatest welfare in life. The more he fathomed the question the more it revealed itself; all coverings fell off from it and left only its awful consequences and its yet more awful essence.

Read of the idiot son; of the night with a daughter in

"L'Hermite"; of the sailor with his sister in "Le Port"; read "Champ d'Olives," "La Petite Roque," "Miss Harriet," "Monsieur Parent," "L'Armoire"; read the marriage in "Sur l'Eau"; and, last utterance of all, "Un Cas de Divorce." That which Marcus Aurelius advised, namely, the invention of a means of destroying in one's imagination the attractiveness of this sin; this, in bright artistic images that overturn one's soul, Maupassant achieves. He wished to praise this love, but the more he examined it the more he cursed it. He cursed it for those calamities and sufferings which it carries with it, for its disappointments, and, above all, for that counterfeit of true love, that deceit, that illusion in it, by which the more confidently a man addicts himself to it the profounder his suffering.

A powerful moral growth in the author during his literary activity, is written in indelible letters in these exquisite short stories, and in his best book, "Sur l'Eau."

Not only in this dethronement of sexual love (involuntary, and therefore so much the more complete) is this moral growth of the author seen; it is seen in all those increasingly higher moral demands which he applies to life.

Not in sexual love alone does he see the innate contradiction between the demands of the animal and rational man; he sees it in all the organisation of the world.

He sees that the world as it is, the material world, is not only not the best of worlds, but, on the contrary,

might be quite different, (this idea is wonderfully expressed in "Horla"), and that it does not satisfy the demands of reason and love; he sees that there is some other world, or at least, the demand for such another world in the soul of man.

He is tormented, not only by the unreasonableness of the material world and its ugliness, but by its unlovingness, its disunity. I do not know a more heartrending cry of despair from a strayed man feeling his loneliness, than the expression of this idea in that most exquisite story, "Solitude."

The thing that most tormented Maupassant, to which he returns many times, is the painful state of loneliness, spiritual loneliness, of man; of that bar which stands between man and his fellows; a bar which, as he says, is the more painfully felt, the nearer the bodily connection

What then, torments him, and what would he have? What will destroy this bar? What suppress this loneliness? Love. Not that love of woman, a love with which he is disgusted; but pure, spiritual, divine love.

And it is that which Maupassant seeks; it is towards this saviour of life long ago plainly disclosed to man, that he painfully strives amid those fetters in which he feels himself bound.

He cannot yet give name to what he seeks; he would not name it with his lips, not wishing to defile his holy of holies. But his unexpressed yearning, shown in his dread of loneliness, is so sincere that it infects and attracts one more strongly than many and many a sermon about love pronounced only with the lips.

The tragedy of Maupassant's life is, that being in the most monstrous and immoral circle, by the force of his genius, that extraordinary light which was in him, he struggled out of the views of that circle and was already near to deliverance, already breathing the air of liberty. But having spent his last force upon this struggle, not able to make one more effort, he perished unfreed.

The tragedy of this ruin consists in that it continues even now for the majority of so-called educated men of our time.

Men at large have never lived without the conception of a meaning in their life. Always and everywhere there have appeared in the front highly-gifted men—prophets, as they are called—who explained to men this meaning and purport of life; and always the ordinary, average men, who have not the strength to make the discovery for themselves, have followed that explanation of life which their prophets have discovered for them.

Our present conception has been, eighteen hundred years ago, revealed by Christianity, simply, clearly, unerringly, and joyously, as is proved by the life of all those who have accepted it and followed that course in life which results from this conception.

But there have appeared those who misinterpret this teaching so that it has become meaningless. And now people are placed in the dilemma of either accepting Christianity as interpreted by Orthodoxy—"Lourdes," the Pope, the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, and so forth—or of going on with life according to the teachings of Renan and those like him; that is, living

without any direction or understanding of life, addicting themselves only to their carnal desires while they are strong, and to their habits when these desires weaken.

People, ordinary people, choose one or the other, sometimes both—first dissoluteness, then orthodoxy. And whole generations live thus, shielding themselves with various theories, invented not to disclose the truth but to conceal it. And ordinary, and, more especially, dull people, are content.

But there are others—not many, they are rare—such as was Maupassant, who themselves with their own eyes see things as they are, see their significance, see the contradictions in life concealed from others, vividly represent to themselves that to which these contradictions must inevitably lead them, and look around them for solutions. They seek these solutions everywhere except where they are to be found, namely, in Christianity; because Christianity appears to them to be an outlived absurdity, repelling them by its deformity. And vainly trying of themselves to discover these solutions, they come to the conviction that solutions do not exist; that it is inherent in life always to carry in oneself these insoluble contradictions. And having come to such a decision, if these people are feeble, unenergetic natures, they put up with such meaningless life; they are even proud of their position, counting their ignorance as a virtue, as a sign of culture. But if they are such energetic, truthful and talented natures as was Maupassant, they do not endure this, but one way or another get out of this absurd life.

In a similar way, people athirst in the wilderness might search everywhere for water except near to those men, who, standing round the spring, defile it, and offer stinking mire instead of the water which is unceasingly streaming out beneath. In such case was Maupassant. He could not believe, it evidently never even entered his head, that the truth he sought had long ago been found, and was so near him. But neither could he believe that man could live in such contradiction as that in which he felt himself encompassed.

Life according to those theories in which he was educated, which environed him, which were corroborated by all the lusts of his young and physically strong being—life consists in pleasures of which woman with her love is the chief, and in the double, again reflected delight of depicting this love and exciting it in others. All this would be well; but upon examining these delights, amid them appear things quite foreign, hostile to this love and this beauty. Woman, for some reason, is disfigured; she becomes pregnant, and repulsively gives birth to her child; then come the children, undesired children; then deceits, cruelties; then moral sufferings; then mere old age; and then death.

Moreover, is such beauty indeed beauty? And why is all this so? It might be well if one could arrest life but life advances. And what does this mean? 'Life advances' means that the hair drops out, becomes grey; teeth decayed, wrinkles, offensive breath. Even before all ends, everything becomes dreadful, repulsive. Daubed rouge, powder, perspiration, odour,

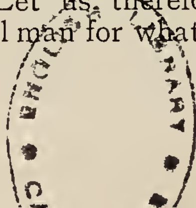
deformity appear. Where, then, is that which I served? Where is beauty? For in that is all. It is gone. There is nothing left. No life.

But not merely is there no life in what seemed to be life; one begins oneself to forsake life, one weakens, loses one's beauty, decomposes; others under one's eyes snatch away those delights in which was all the good of life. Nor is this all. Some sort of possibility of another life begins to glimmer on the mind, something more, some other kind of union with men, with all the world; one that does not admit of all these deceits; a something which cannot by any means be broken; which is true, and always beautiful. . . . But this cannot be. It is only the tempting vision of an oasis, of which we know that it does not exist, and that desert sand is all around.

Maupassant attained that tragic moment in life when commenced the struggle between the falsehood of the life about him and the true life of which he began to be conscious. The first throes of spiritual birth had already commenced in him.

And it is these anguishes of birth that he expressed in his best work, especially in his short stories.

Had it been his, not to die in the anguish of birth, but to be born, he would have given us great instructive works; but, as it is, what he has given us in his birth struggle is much. Let us, therefore be thankful to this powerful, truthful man for what he has given us.



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